

THEODULF'S MYTHICAL SILVER HERCULES VASE, POETICA VANITAS, AND THE AUGUSTINIAN CRITIQUE OF THE ROMAN HERITAGE

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The long poem by Theodulf of Orléans commonly known as *Contra iudices* (*Against Judges*), dedicated to Charlemagne, King of the Franks, and datable to ca. 799, includes the following passage:

I have a vase decorated with ancient figures. It is of genuine quality and of no light weight, on which are engraved the crimes of Cacus, the skulls of men on stakes, dissolved in gore, iron-clad cliffs and signs of various plunderings, the field stained with human blood and that of cattle, where the fury of Hercules broke the bones of the son of Vulcan. He belches forth the paternal fires from his savage mouth as Hercules bursts open his stomach with his knee and rends his intestines with his heels. The club strikes the smoking throat and face. Here you will see the bulls as they come out from the hollow of the rock and are frightened to be dragged backwards again. The vase has a small even circle on the mouth, not very wide, bearing small figures; when the child from Tiryns has struck the two snakes, there are also depicted his ten labors. The exterior part is polished bright with frequent use, and an old scene rubbed thin is gone, where Alcides, and the river Calydon, and the centaur Nessus are fighting for your beauty, Deianira. The lethal garment is seen smeared with the blood of Nessus and there are seen also the fearful fates of the unfortunate Lichas. Antaeus also loses his life in his strong arms, being deprived of touching the ground as he was wont to do.¹

This passage is well known to art historians, already appearing in 1892 in Julius von Schlosser's great collection of literary sources for early medieval art. Von Schlosser commented upon the pas-

sage at length, concluding emphatically that Theodulf here describes an actual antique silver vessel, and describes it with a surprisingly archeological accuracy: "Wir dürfen also dem Gefäß volle Realität zuerkennen. . . . Auch die fast archäologisch zu nennende Kenntnis der Interpretation einer antiken Arbeit seitens eines karolingischen Dichters ist zu erklären." Finding no single ancient literary source from which the passage was lifted wholesale, noting the graphic and convincing description of weight and wear on the vessel, noting further both the (admittedly infrequent) occurrence of the scenes mentioned in ancient art and the existence of Hercules scenes on some surviving ancient silver vessels, von Schlosser felt sufficiently certain of the "full reality" of the vase to suggest a probable date for its manufacture "in die beginnende Verfallzeit der Antike," that is, presumably in the second or third century A.D. Von Schlosser explained this accurate description as an outgrowth of Theodulf's unique ability to see the aesthetic value of ancient art and to appreciate the ancient spirit and feeling for form (*Formgefühl*), an ability comprehensible as the result of the Romanized Visigoth Theodulf's membership in the Latin race, as opposed to the Northern-Germanic.²

In spite of the questionable working assumptions underlying this analysis, which should require no lengthy commentary, von Schlosser's interpretation of these verses has won nearly universal acceptance and wide currency in the scholarly literature concerned with Carolingian art and indeed with Carolingian history. In her important collection of literary sources for early medieval art

¹Trans. N. Alexandrenko, *The Poetry of Theodulf of Orleans: A Translation and Critical Study*, Diss. (Tulane University, 1970), pp. 157–202, here 166–68; see also the translation by P. Godman, *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance* (Oxford, 1985), 164–65. For the Latin text see E. Dümmler, MGH, *Poetae* 1 (Berlin, 1881), 493–517, esp. 498.

²J. von Schlosser, *Schriftquellen zur Geschichte der karolingischen Kunst* (Vienna, 1892), no. 1134, 427–30.

Caecilia Davis-Weyer presented a translation of the passage under the general rubric "Carolingian Antiquarianism," and although she noted its reliance upon the poetry of Ovid and Virgil, she clearly implied belief in the "reality" of the ancient vessel as described by Theodulf.³ Jean Adhémar went so far as to deny the possibility of disagreeing with von Schlosser's conclusion, and Erwin Panofsky observed that "Theodulf's special interest in classical subjects is also attested by his famous ecphrasis on an antique vase, presumably of silver, showing the Labors of Hercules," attaching to the passage the technical rhetorical phrase for the description of a work of art, while failing to note that in Antiquity such rhetorical exercises frequently concerned imaginary artistic works.⁴

I cannot agree that Theodulf's poem can be regarded as an accurate description of an actual work of ancient art, a theory which has not previously been subjected to critical scrutiny and upon which a good deal of further speculation has been erected. My reasons for rejecting the theory begin with the clear internal evidence of the passage in question. Theodulf never states that he himself saw this silver vessel; rather he explicitly states that a man approached his *servant* with a view to offering a bribe: "A certain man called out secretly in a low voice to a servant of ours and spoke these words which were to be told to me: 'I have a vase' . . . [etc.]"⁵ The entire passage is deliberately presented as a direct quotation from a third party as relayed to Theodulf by a servant, and it is made quite plain that Theodulf would only have seen the vessel had he accepted the bribe. Surely he did not do this, as the entire poem makes abundantly clear; this is not a "confession," like Augustine's reporting of his adolescent escapade of orchard-robbing.⁶ We cannot conclude that "antiquarian" is

a suitable description not only for Theodulf but also for his servant and for the owner of the vessel, who in offering it as a bribe demonstrated his fine classical education and his interest in mythology by describing it in such detail that Theodulf was able to put the description into Ovidian elegiac verse and still produce a rendering of the vessel's decoration so accurate that we can now use this poem as archeological evidence and even suggest the date of manufacture of the vessel. To be sure, one can suggest that Theodulf here has a literary purpose and does not accurately describe his encounter with the vessel, as indeed I will attempt to show. Such a programmatic domination of the "accidental" elements of a literary work might well be said to be characteristic of medieval literature in general.⁷ It is beyond question that the fabrication of supposed works of art, and especially of "ancient" works of art, is a very widespread and well-known feature of medieval literature.⁸ Yet if we grant that Theodulf here altered the setting of the "ecphrasis," why should we not suspect that he (for some yet to be determined literary purpose) similarly altered its content?

The "persuasive details" cited by von Schlosser and Adhémar as evidence of Theodulf's direct encounter with this silver vessel deserve further scrutiny. For example, the text describes the fire belched from the mouth of Cacus, the "field stained with human blood and that of cattle," the "smoking gullet," and other details difficult to render in pictorial terms. Is it likely that Theodulf actually "saw" the distinction between the blood of men and that of cattle in the reliefs of a silver repoussé vessel? As Davis-Weyer herself points out, these expressions are directly and closely based upon literary sources,⁹ and it is for this reason that

³C. Davis-Weyer, *Early Medieval Art 300–1150* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1971), 106.

⁴J. Adhémar, *Influences antiques dans l'art du moyen âge français: Recherches sur les sources et les thèmes d'inspiration* (London, 1939), 309–10; E. Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (Stockholm, 1960), 82 note 2. For recent literature concerning this rhetorical genre and its relationship to medieval and in particular to Byzantine art, see H. Maguire, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium* (Princeton, 1981), esp. 22–30, with further bibliography.

⁵Lines 177–79; Dümmler, *Poetae*, 498; Alexandrenko, 166. Davis-Weyer, Adhémar, and von Schlosser are to be commended for either including this introductory phrase or at least making a reference to it, but none gives the text in full or addresses its possible significance.

⁶*Confessions* II.4. See Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth, 1961), 47.

⁷See, for example, J. Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, trans. Catharine Misrahi, 3rd ed. (New York, 1982), 17: "taking a medieval text [here monastic letters] seriously does not necessarily mean taking all its expressions literally."

⁸See in general A. Frey-Sallman, *Aus dem Nachleben antiker Göttergestalten: Die antiken Gottheiten in der Bildbeschreibung des Mittelalters und der italienischen Frührenaissance* (Leipzig, 1931); paradoxically, in a work largely devoted to descriptions of imaginary works of ancient art, the author follows von Schlosser in accepting Theodulf's passage as an accurate depiction of an actual object. For a very interesting analysis of a later example of imaginary description put to thematic purpose, see the marble fountain decorated with scenes of Troy described by Guillaume de Machaut, discussed by Margaret J. Ehrhart, "Machaut's *Dit de la fontaine amoureuse*, the Choice of Paris, and the Duties of Rulers," *Philological Quarterly* 59 (1980), 119–39, esp. 127–32.

⁹Dümmler, *Poetae*, 498–99. Davis-Weyer (*Early Medieval Art*,

some literary scholars and classicists have doubted the "reality" of the vessel.¹⁰ Certainly the observation that "the exterior part is polished bright with frequent use and an old scene rubbed thin is gone," which is not borrowed from a literary source, appears to indicate some direct experience with actual antique vessels, even if it makes it more difficult to understand how Theodulf was able to see so much detail among the "disappearing figures."

In fact, I think it more than likely that Theodulf saw some sort of late antique silver repoussé vessel, and perhaps even one decorated with scenes of the Hercules cycle. I can go further than this: I believe Theodulf intended that his description could be acceptable as pertaining to an actual antique vessel, since, as I hope to demonstrate, his intended meaning required him to identify this series of episodes as part of the tradition of ancient, indeed of pagan, Rome. What I do not accept is that Theodulf ever saw the particular scenes he mentions on an antique vessel; rather, by drawing upon several well-known literary sources he created this program of "images" for his own purposes. It is altogether characteristic of Theodulf to artistically craft his poems, especially his longer poems, with a particular purpose in mind, rather than to string

together anecdotal coincidences in an arbitrary manner.¹¹ This fictitious description of a Roman silver vase patently accords with the larger themes and program of the poem as a whole. A review of the ancient artistic and literary works that can be related to Theodulf's poem will serve not only to undermine further the "archeological" interpretation of the passage, but also to adumbrate the subtle program underlying Theodulf's poem and to reveal his sophisticated and highly critical handling of the classical tradition.

Several fourth-century silver bowls from the Mildenhall treasure in the British Museum are decorated with repoussé scenes around the rim that accord quite well with the "level rim of modest width bearing small figures" of Theodulf's poem, although the specific iconography is quite different. A splendid first-century silver-gilt cup from the Hildesheim treasure now in Berlin even shows Hercules as an infant strangling the twin serpents, an episode that Theodulf specifically mentions.¹² Hercules is in fact among the most common subjects in late antique art, not only appearing in the luxury arts but also on coins, in mosaics, textiles, metalwork and painting, and in numerous sarcophagus reliefs.¹³ Yet, after examining this very extensive material, it is quite clear that surviving Roman art can provide only a surprisingly poor parallel for the iconographic program sketched by Theodulf in his poem. And it is worth emphasizing here that by Hercules scenes in Roman art I mean in *all* of Roman art, of any period, from any region, in any material. Drawing quite indiscriminately from all this vast and diffuse material an episode here, another there, and in other words throwing reasonable methodological limits altogether aside, it is still extremely difficult to closely parallel the Hercules scenes cited by Theodulf; how much more unlikely, then, that all these epi-

106) says that "Theodulf lets the owner extol it [the vessel], and in doing so displays his own command of mythology as well as his intimacy with the poetry of Ovid and Vergil, whose expressions he borrows throughout the description. It is likely that Theodulf was also the author of the Caroline Books, where a similar interest in classical mythology is demonstrated." Apparently she means that Theodulf was able to understand the iconography of the ancient silver vessel because of his knowledge of classical literature, whose phrases he borrows to describe it. Why not consider that he simply made up the description from the literary sources so well known to him? In the *Libri Carolini* (III.23), which she quite rightly cites as displaying a "similar interest," this is manifestly what Theodulf has done. Surely no one would maintain that Theodulf saw ancient images of all the myths he describes. Indeed, a particularly interesting passage is included by Davis-Weyer in her fine collection (p. 101); Theodulf there criticizes painters who "follow the vain fables of the poets" (*poetarum vanissimas fabulas*), stating that they fashion (*finguntur*) various images, but concludes that "all these things are contained in *pagan literature*" (emphasis mine), clearly revealing that his extensive knowledge of classical art is based upon literary sources rather than upon surviving remains. For the Latin text see H. Bastgen, ed., *Libri Carolini sive Caroli Magni Capitulare de Imaginibus*, MGH, *Conc* 2 Supplement (Hannover-Leipzig, 1924), 151.

¹⁰ P. Wolters, "Darstellungen auf anderen Bildwerken," in Friedrich Münzer, *Cacus der Rinderdieb* (Basel, 1911), 131; granting that Theodulf very likely did see some form of ancient silver vessel, the close links to Virgil's text nonetheless show that the passage is "... in Wahrheit nur eine Probe der Dichtkunst Theodulfs . . . , nicht seines archäologischen Wissens."

¹¹ See in general Godman, *Poetry*, 10–16, and (concerning the very closely related *Ad Karolum Regem*) D. Schaller, "Vortrags- und Zirkulardichtung am Hof Karls des Grossen, *Mittelaltersches Jahrbuch* 6 (1970), 14–36, esp. 21: "... hier ein zielbewusster künstlerischer Ordnungswille am Werk war. Im einzelnen bemerkenswert ist vielleicht noch, dass die Kompositionsglieder sinnvoll ineinander verfugt sind."

¹² See K. S. Painter, *The Mildenhall Treasure: Roman Silver from East Anglia* (London, 1977), 13, nos. 5–10 and figs. 15 and 20, and U. Gehrig, *Hildesheimer Silberschatz im Antikenmuseum*, 2nd ed. (Berlin, 1980), 14 and pl. III. This cup was cited by von Schlosser, *Schriftquellen* (above, note 2).

¹³ No comprehensive study or bibliography on the subject of Hercules in ancient art exists; for a brief overview with further references see H. Sichtermann, "Ercolo italico e Romano," in *EAA* 3, cols. 387–90.

sodes ever occurred on a single object that fortuitously came to Theodulf's attention!

The iconography of the hero Hercules in ancient art focuses to an overwhelming degree upon the Twelve Labors, taken either singly or as a group.¹⁴ Theodulf does mention *ten* Labors, but gives no details whatever concerning them. At the end of the passage he describes at some length two episodes which he presumably means to be included with the other unspecified ten Labors so as to constitute the standard cycle of twelve. These two episodes are the wrestling match with Antaeus and particularly the conflict with Nessus and Achelous for the beauty of Deianira, leading to the presentation of the deadly poisoned mantle which will result in Hercules' death and the killing of the unfortunate messenger Lichas. What, then, was the visual arrangement of the scene Theodulf here "describes," with Hercules, Nessus, Achelous, Deianira, the mantle, and Lichas all represented at once and engaged in various actions? The scene in fact consists of three quite separate episodes rarely or never included among the Labors or indeed represented elsewhere. The wrestling bout with Antaeus is also not normally included with the canonical Labors and is infrequently represented elsewhere in ancient art.¹⁵ Yet the Cacus scene, to which Theodulf accords priority of place, the most detailed exposition, and thereby the greatest emphasis, is among all these Hercules episodes the most disturbing, most rare, and ultimately most revealing.

The struggle between Hercules and Cacus is quite a common subject in literature and art from the period of the Renaissance, the earliest examples being in a great treatise by Coluccio Salutati, and a relief on the Florence Campanile.¹⁶ Scholars have understandably and unanimously held that this relief and other familiar later works are all derived from ancient literary sources, not

from ancient works of art. There is, to the best of my knowledge, only one certain representation of Hercules and Cacus from all of Antiquity, namely, the reverse of a medallion of Emperor Antoninus Pius issued ca. 143, a very rare, indeed a unique, piece in the Cabinet des Médailles, which has virtually nothing to do with the episode as described by Theodulf.¹⁷ The medallion belongs to the so-called "early Roman history" series issued by Antoninus Pius between 140 and 143 in preparation for the celebration of Rome's 900th anniversary, which also included depictions of Romulus and Remus suckling, the miraculous sow, and Aeneas leading Anchises and Ascanius from Troy.¹⁸ It is extremely unlikely that there is any direct connection between this rare medallion and Theodulf's poem, although I believe that there is a highly significant parallel thematic context, and most likely even a common source.

In contrast to the great rarity of the Cacus scene in ancient art, the episode is mentioned and treated at some length in a number of literary works, of which one stands out as the fullest, best known, and indeed essential source of most of the later references, including Theodulf's poem.¹⁹ In Virgil's *Aeneid*, VIII.185–275, the story of Hercules and Cacus is told by King Evander to Aeneas when, immediately after seeing the miraculous white sow, the Trojan hero first glimpses the future site of Rome. Evander tells Aeneas that Hercules' deed was the just punishment for Cacus' many crimes, and also allowed the local inhabitants to live in peace and security for the first time.²⁰ The Cacus story in the *Aeneid* is then a foundation myth whose purpose is to establish the mythological precedent for the justice and power of the future rulers of Rome in general, and of Virgil's patron the Emperor Augustus in particular. Hercules is made a close parallel to Augustus' "ancestor"

¹⁴See F. Brommer, *Herakles. Die zwölf Taten des Helden in antiker Kunst und Literatur*, 2nd. ed. (Cologne-Vienna, 1972).

¹⁵For the former see H. P. Isler, "Acheloo," in H. C. Ackermann and J. R. Gisler, eds., *Lexikon iconographicum mythologiae classicae* (Zurich-Munich, 1981), 1:12–36, and especially 28 on Achelous and Herakles in Roman art, with only six reasonably certain examples of the episode. For the Antaeus episode in Antiquity, see R. Olmos and L. J. Balmaseda, "Antaios," in Ackermann and Gisler, *Lexikon iconographicum*, 1:800–811.

¹⁶For the latter see M. Trachtenberg, *The Campanile of Florence Cathedral: "Giotto's Tower"* (New York, 1971), 86 and 94–95 and fig. 132. For a recent general survey, with additional examples and bibliography, see V. Bush, "Bandinelli's Hercules and Cacus and Florentine Tradition," in H. Millon, ed., *Studies in Italian Art and Architecture 15th through 18th Centuries*, I (Rome, 1980), 163–206.

¹⁷See F. Brommer, "Caco," in *EAA* 2, 247–48, and fig. 375, with older literature, and for the myth of Cacus, P. Small, *Cacus and Marsyas in Etrusco-Roman Legend* (Princeton, 1983). In this book devoted to Cacus in Roman legend and art, the author makes no mention of artistic works illustrating the Hercules and Cacus episode, although she treats the literary sources at length; Cacus in Roman art clearly has a tradition entirely distinct from that seen in the Renaissance.

¹⁸See P. V. Hill, *The Dating and Arrangement of the Undated Coins of Rome, A.D. 98–148* (London, 1970), 89–101.

¹⁹See Small, *Cacus and Marsyas*, esp. 16–36, and G. K. Galinsky, *The Herakles Theme* (Totowa, N.J., 1972), 142–46, a condensed version of that author's "The Hercules-Cacus Episode in *Aeneid* VIII," *American Journal of Philology* 87 (1966), 18–51.

²⁰R. A. B. Mynors, ed. *P. Vergili Maronis Opera* (Oxford, 1969), 287–91, and K. W. Gransden, *Aeneid Book VIII* (Cambridge-New York, 1976), with commentary, 106–23.

Aeneas, as Cacus is to Aeneas' opponent Turnus. The pious hero's triumph is, in each case, a victory over a deceitful and thus morally inferior opponent,²¹ thematically related to Virgil's famous phrase that it was the historical mission and art of Rome "to impose the rule of law, to spare the conquered, battle down the proud,"²² an important phrase and theme to which I will shortly return. Hence the appearance of this episode on the medallion of Antoninus Pius celebrating the foundation of Rome; it is at once a moralizing "old Roman" and, for perceptive readers of Virgil, a strongly imperial scene. For Theodulf and the other figures at Charlemagne's court who constituted his intended audience, Virgil's *Aeneid* was the best-known and most highly regarded work of pre-Christian ancient literature. Theodulf, who closely follows the sequence and specific imagery, although certainly not the exact language of Virgil's poem (which would scarcely have been possible because of the change from hexameters to elegiac meter), must have expected the Virgilian allusion to be recognized by his readers.²³ Is it not then worth considering that the Cacus episode in particular and this passage in general has a programmatic significance in Theodulf's poem which is similar to, indeed reflects and derives its full resonance from, the context and programmatic significance of the passage in the *Aeneid*?

In this connection the late antique mythographical tradition needs to be cited. For the sixth-century Italian writer Fulgentius, whose *Mitologiae* was read and followed by Carolingian encyclopedic writers such as Hrabanus Maurus, the name of the monster Cacus was derived from the Greek *kakós*, "evil," while Hercules represented manly virtue, fortitude, especially triumph over

adversity.²⁴ It is as the *exemplum virtutis* that Hercules most commonly appears through the Middle Ages into the Renaissance and indeed beyond.²⁵ Boethius, in the *Consolation of Philosophy*, uses Hercules in a related sense, as a sort of virtuous Stoic hero, concluding with an explicit endorsement of Hercules as a model whom others should imitate. This famous and very important passage must be, with Virgil, another direct source for Theodulf's verse. After citing several of the "canonical" episodes, Boethius concludes the list of Hercules' Labors, the passage, and the chapter, in the following verses:

And breaking Achelous' horns, did make him back
return.
He on the Libyan sands did proud Antaeus kill,
And with the mighty Cacus' blood Evander's wrath
fulfill.
To hold on high the sphere of heaven with never
bending neck
Of all his many toils the last was, and most hard,
And for this last and greatest toil the heaven was his
reward.
You gallant men pursue this way of high renown,
Why yield you? Overcome the earth, and you the
stars shall crown.²⁶

This passage is the only precedent in art or literature known to me for the close linkage of the Achelous and Antaeus episodes with Cacus and the Labors prior to Theodulf's poem, and surely the allusion was again meant to be recognized by the poem's intended readers, along with the evocation of Virgil.²⁷ Yet there is, I believe, a distinction between the positive evaluation of Hercules' deed in Virgil, Boethius, and the numerous Carolingian mythographical references on the one hand, and the rather different evaluation in Theo-

²¹ Galinsky, *Herakles Theme*, 145, and D. L. M. Drew, *The Allegory of the Aeneid* (Oxford, 1927), 20–21.

²² *Aeneid* VI.853–54; trans. R. Fitzgerald, *The Aeneid* (New York, 1980), 190. For discussion of this point see E. Paratore, "Hercule et Cacus chez Virgile et Tite-Live," in H. Bardon and R. Verdière, eds., *Vergiliana—Recherches sur Virgile* (Leiden, 1971), 260–82, esp. 267–68.

²³ For the circulation and audience of Theodulf's poem see the important article by Schaller, "Vortrags- und Zirkulardichtung" (above, note 11). For Theodulf's pervasive use of Virgil see the dozens of close echoes of Virgilian phrases listed by Liersch, *Gedichte Theodulfs*, 67–68. Of Alcuin, the best known among Theodulf's contemporaries at Charlemagne's court, Peter Godman recently stated that although "the influence of Virgil . . . is all-pervasive," his acquaintance with other Latin poets "was slight and at second hand"; see Alcuin: *The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York* (Oxford, 1982), lxxii. For the importance of Virgil in the 9th century generally, see R. R. Bolgar, *The Classical Heritage and Its Beneficiaries: From the Carolingian Age to the End of the Renaissance* (New York, 1964), 124–27 and esp. 413.

²⁴ *Mitologiae* II.3, in R. Helm, ed., *Fabii Planciadii Fulgentii V.C. Opera* (Leipzig, 1898; rpr. Leipzig, 1970), 42, and *Fulgentius the Mythographer*, trans. L. G. Whitbread (Columbus, Ohio, 1971), 67–68. This etymology is false; see Small, *Cacus and Marsyas*, 7 and note 12.

²⁵ See Galinsky, *Herakles Theme*, 185–230, for a well-annotated overview, and esp. the studies focused on the Carolingian period by N. Gussone and N. Staubach, "Zu Motivkreis und Sinngehalt der Cathedra Petri," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 9 (1975), 334–58, and Chiara Frugoni, "L'ideologia del potere imperiale nella 'Cattedra di S. Pietro,'" *BIS* 86 (1976–77), 67–181.

²⁶ For text and translation see H. F. Stewart, *Boethius, Tractates, De Consolatione Philosophiae* (Cambridge, Mass.-London, 1918), 362–63. This passage is discussed at length in the important recent study by Seth Lerer, *Boethius and Dialogue: Literary Method in the Consolation of Philosophy* (Princeton, 1985), esp. 180–202.

²⁷ The *Consolation* was not cited or followed in any work of the early Middle Ages prior to Alcuin; see M. T. Gibson, "Boethius in the Carolingian Schools," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 32 (1982), 43–56, esp. 54.

dulf's poem on the other. For Theodulf's Hercules is a hero whose virtue is ambiguous and tainted, as a comparison to both Virgil and Boethius will demonstrate.

Theodulf drastically condensed the Virgilian passage of nearly a hundred lines to ten, and in such a way that the brutality of Hercules' retribution is dramatically highlighted. Hercules "broke the bones," "bursts open his stomach with his knee and rends his intestines with his heels," "strikes the smoking throat and face," phrases for which there are some parallels in Virgil's account, but only interspersed with descriptions of the lowing cattle, of Hercules' several vain attempts to enter Cacus' retreat, of Cacus' emission of a thick but ineffective smoke screen, and other details. Also, it is surely both deliberate and significant that Theodulf attributes the violence directly to "the fury of Hercules," with only brief and postponed allusion to Cacus' cattle-rustling which had provoked the anger in the first place. In Virgil, Cacus' thievery and general monstrousness leads to his just "execution" by Hercules, and in Boethius Hercules' killing of Cacus fulfills the wrath of *Evander*, not of Hercules. Indeed, where Virgil is at pains to present the justice and "civilizing" intent and effect of Hercules' deed, Theodulf deemphasizes both motivation and justification for the killing of Cacus. It is worth noting that in another related poem, which explicitly addresses the proper interpretation of pagan myth, Theodulf actually refers to "poor, helpless Cacus" (*Cacus inops*), using an adjective for this mythical figure which sharply distinguishes him from Virgil's cruel monster.²⁸

The two versions of the Achelous episode in Boethius and Theodulf should be compared. Boethius merely says that Hercules broke the horns of Achelous, causing the river god to retreat in shame. Theodulf tells us that Hercules' desire for the beautiful woman Deianira led him to battle with both Achelous and with the centaur Nessus,

episodes derived from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which almost certainly provides the direct source for Theodulf's close linkage of the Achelous and Nessus episodes. Moreover, Ovid proceeds to relate that the killing of the centaur will lead eventually, after Hercules' wife Deianira suspects him of marital infidelity, to Hercules' excruciating death brought about by the "lethal garment" of Nessus, a detail that Theodulf explicitly and pointedly does include in this passage.²⁹ The description of the "silver vessel" concludes with a reference to Hercules' brutal and entirely unjust murder of the "unfortunate Lichas," whom our allegedly virtuous hero dashed to bits on the rocks solely for the crime of having been an innocent messenger, and this despite Lichas' pleas for mercy as a suppliant, a detail also mentioned by Ovid, whose irreverent treatment of ancient myth was thoroughly exploited by Theodulf. Finally and most significantly, it must be noted that Theodulf tells us nothing of Hercules' immediately following apotheosis, the climax of the story in both Ovid and Boethius. In this reinterpretation of his ancient sources Theodulf follows the standard Christian patristic argument that Hercules is above all a pagan figure, a mere "strong man," whose virtue of fortitude is finally much outweighed by his vices of anger and lechery, and who is in any event radically divorced from the grace of God which alone offers the "path to the stars" and personal immortality.³⁰

Surely it ought to be clear from his transformation of his sources that Theodulf did not intend this passage as a paean to Hercules the personification of virtue, but rather as a warning against the dangers, even to an otherwise virtuous man, of the vices of anger and lust. It is worth noting that the struggle with Antaeus, whose presence may seem a bit mysterious, was interpreted by Fulgentius as a struggle against *libido*, which Antaeus personifies. Fulgentius warns in the immediately preceding chapter that Hercules shows us that "lust can conquer even virtue."³¹ In his treatment of the

²⁸Poem 45, *De libris quos legere solebam et qualiter fabulae poetarum a philosophis mystice pertractantur*, line 24; Dümmler, *Poetae*, 543–44; Alexandrenko, 256–60. I have not been able to find the word *inops* in medieval Latin lexicæ, presumably because its meaning had not altered from classical usage. P. G. W. Glare, *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1982), 918, lists as meanings 4 and 5 for persons (the first three meanings are the root sense of "without money," which scarcely fits the circumstances of Cacus, although this may be related to the Augustinian discussion treated later in this paper) both "defenseless" and "powerless, impotent," providing citations for both from Virgil's *Aeneid* (IX.290 and IV.300 respectively), and for the latter from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* XIV.217: "alone, helpless, and hopeless" (*solus, inops, exspes*). Theodulf seems to have employed the word in this sense, drawing upon these sources well known to him.

²⁹Publius Ovidius Naso, *Metamorphoses*, trans. F. J. Miller (Cambridge, Mass., 1944), 2:2–23 (Book IX.1–272). Theodulf knew Ovid well, listing him among the pagan authors he had read (Dümmler, *Poetae*, 543–44, line 18), and using Ovidian episodes and language throughout his own poems, although it should also be noted that, according to Godman, *Poetry*, 8, Theodulf's familiarity with Ovid was exceptional at this period.

³⁰See Galinsky, *Herakles Theme*, 188–89, with extensive references. Theodulf does in fact, elsewhere in the poem (lines 571–76), include the theme of apotheosis and even closely echoes the Boethian and Ovidian language, but applies this to the just Christian judge rather than to the pagan hero; see Dümmler, *Poetae*, 508 and Alexandrenko, 185.

³¹*Mitologiae* II.4 (Helm, 43); *Fulgentius the Mythographer*, 68.

Hercules Labors Boethius holds out the promise of consolation, even glorification, on the basis of pagan philosophy and the pagan tradition, but Theodulf uses the same theme to demonstrate the coarse violence and destruction at the core of the traditions of pagan Rome. The Virgilian treatment of the Cacus episode as emblematic of Roman imperial virtue and justice appears to be deliberately turned on its head, Hercules providing a model for behavior deeply tainted and imperfect, and clearly quite unsuitable for emulation by any good Christian. Sacred and profane are thus sharply contrasted; pagan virtue and justice are to be radically distinguished from Christian virtue and justice.

I trust that I have now made this point sufficiently clearly in terms of the specific language of the passage of *Contra iudices* dealing with an ancient silver vessel and the relationship of that passage to the classical tradition upon which it is based. Unfortunately space does not permit me to show the degree to which the same themes and conceptions are woven throughout the long poem as a whole, a poem whose essential theme is announced at the very beginning with the exhortation: "Stern judges, take the narrow path of just judgment, and let your feet despise the crooked by-ways. The former path leads to heaven, the latter into darkness. The righteous life keeps to this one; gaping death has the other."³² Theodulf immediately proceeds to specify that the chief enemies of justice are "sinister gifts" (*munera saeva*)³³ of precisely the sort represented by the Hercules vase. Indeed that bribe was only one of a series of sinister gifts offered for the corruption of the Christian Frankish judge, the others being "crystal and gems from the East, . . . fine golden coins, which were struck with Arabic letters and characters, and coins of white silver imprinted with a Roman stamp, . . . a rug dyed in different colors, which . . . a savage Arab has sent, . . . rugs, pelts named for you, Cordoba," indeed items from the land of Sheba, from the Ganges, from Hyrcania and Syria, the common denominator in this obviously contrived list being the origin of all these seductive bribes outside the Christian world.³⁴ The dialectical tension between paganism and Christianity was never relaxed by Theodulf. One must not be misled by his characteristic expression of

this tension, in another important and closely related poem, through a famous quotation drawn from pagan literature, employing Virgil's mysterious and evocative image of the two gates of sleep, one of ivory and one of horn, to represent the radical separation of falsehood and truth, paganism and Christianity.³⁵ The fact that Theodulf was intimately familiar with pagan literature and traditions, and even displayed a certain weakness for proudly flaunting that familiarity, does not mean that he was in any way sympathetic to classical paganism; indeed, his familiarity may have made him more aware of its dangerously enticing charms than his contemporaries and his intended audience. It was certainly his perception of the present danger posed to the court of Charlemagne by injudicious admiration for classical traditions that led him to state this monitory message so forcefully and repeatedly. The historical circumstances at the court form the essential background for understanding Theodulf's *Contra iudices* and its treatment of the figure of Hercules, and for understanding Theodulf's purpose in advancing such an argument at that precise moment, in the year 799, on the very eve of Charlemagne's assumption of the imperial Roman title. Those complex historical circumstances must be explored at length elsewhere.³⁶ Yet, even in this restricted context, it is essential to recognize that Theodulf's attitude toward the pagan Roman tradition seen in these poems is by no means an idiosyncrasy or an isolated phenomenon, but rests on the strongest possible patristic authority, that of Augustine of Hippo, another knowledgeable but ultimately quite unsympathetic critic, whose *City of God* provides the fundamental reference and authority for the anti-Roman position preached by Theodulf.

The influence of Augustine's ideas in general and of the *City of God* in particular is so important and pervasive, but has been so little regarded by those concerned with the cultural phenomenon of the "Carolingian Renaissance," that it requires exposition at length elsewhere. It may be said here, however, that the general process of using classical sources to condemn themselves, of turning them

³⁵ Poem 45, lines 53–55; Dümmler, *Poetae*, 544; Alexandrenko, 259–60.

³⁶ I am preparing a monographic study of the Theodulf poem and related matters, tentatively entitled *A Tainted Mantle: Hercules and the Classical Tradition at the Carolingian Court*. Here it must suffice to note that Theodulf wove throughout the long poem the themes of the danger of bribery and lust, and the incompatibility of brutal corporal punishments demanded by "ancient law" with Christian mercy.

³² Dümmler, *Poetae*, 493–94; Alexandrenko, 157–58.

³³ Line 16; Dümmler, *Poetae*, 494; Alexandrenko, 158.

³⁴ Lines 171–264; Dümmler, *Poetae*, 498–500; Alexandrenko, 166–71.

upside down, which Theodulf employs in his *Contra iudices*, is a central structural and thematic device of Augustine's great work.³⁷ It is also possible to observe a specific connection of the *City of God* to the supposed Roman silver vessel with Hercules scenes described by Theodulf. As previously noted, Theodulf based his "description" upon the texts of Ovid, Boethius, and especially Virgil, but subtly altered the tone, character, and meaning of the non-Christian sources, indeed criticized and reversed their interpretation, particularly in the Cacus episode. In Virgil Cacus was a monster, literally a semi-human (*semihomo*), and Hercules' destruction of him was a just and civilizing act which created peace for the first settlers of the site of Rome, leading ultimately to Hercules' apotheosis and to the foundation and prosperity of Rome. Theodulf, on the other hand, makes Hercules' action the outcome of his own murderous fury, leading, along with his other Labors, not to Hercules' apotheosis but to further murders and to his own agonizing death. The internal evidence of the text already traced is sufficient to justify this interpretation, I believe, but the lengthy development of the Cacus scene must also reflect the remarkable discussion of the episode by Augustine in the *City of God*. In Book XIX Augustine discusses the concept of peace as the final good for which all men yearn and strive. In Chapter 12 he argues that it is natural for all men to have this desire for peace, observing that even those (among whom he most emphatically means to include the ancient Romans) "who take pleasure in exercising their warlike nature in command and battle" seek peace, "for every man seeks peace by waging war, but no man seeks war by making peace. For even they who intentionally interrupt the peace in which they are living have no hatred of peace, but only wish it changed into a peace that suits them better."³⁸ Augustine then goes on to tell the story of Cacus, closely and indeed explicitly basing himself upon the passage in the *Aeneid* later used by Theodulf, but altering the Virgilian interpretation in an astonishing passage which must be quoted at length:

³⁷ See H. Hagendahl, *Augustine and the Latin Classics* (Stockholm, 1967), 449, and esp. V. Hand, *Augustin und das klassische römische Selbstverständnis: Eine Untersuchung über die Begriffe Gloria, Virtus, Iustitia und Res Publica in De Civitate Dei* (Hamburg, 1970).

³⁸ Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. M. Dods (New York, 1950), 687; B. Dombart and A. Kalb, *Sancti Aurelii Augustini De civitate Dei*, CCSL 48, Part 14, 2, Book XIX.12, p. 675.

But let us suppose a man such as poetry and mythology speak of—a man so insociable and savage as to be called rather a semi-man than a man. Although, then, his kingdom was the solitude of a dreary cave, and he himself was so singularly bad-hearted that he was named *kakós*, which is the Greek word for *bad*; though he had no wife to soothe him with endearing talk, no children to play with, no sons to do his bidding, no friend to enliven him with intercourse, not even his father Vulcan (though in one respect he was happier than his father, not having begotten a monster like himself); although he gave to no man, but took as he wished whatever he could, from whomsoever he could, when he could; yet in that solitary den, the floor of which, as Virgil says, was always reeking with recent slaughter, there was nothing else than peace sought, a peace in which no one should molest him, or disquiet him with any assault or alarm. With his own body he desired to be at peace; and he was satisfied only in proportion as he had this peace. For he ruled his members, and they obeyed him; and for the sake of pacifying his mortal nature, which rebelled when it needed anything, and of allaying the sedition of hunger which threatened to banish the soul from the body, he made forays, slew, and devoured, but used the ferocity and savageness he displayed in these actions only for the preservation of his own life's peace. So that, had he been willing to make with other men the same peace which he made with himself in his own cave, he would neither have been called bad, nor a monster, nor a semi-man. Or if the appearance of his body and his vomiting smoky fires frightened men from having any dealings with him, perhaps his fierce ways arose not from a desire to do mischief, but from the necessity of finding a living. But he may have had no existence, or at least, he was not such as the poets fancifully describe him (*poetica vanitate*), for they had to exalt Hercules, and did so at the expense of Cacus. It is better, then, to believe that such a man or semi-man never existed, and that this, in common with many other fancies of the poets, is mere fiction.³⁹

The meaning of this remarkable passage and its relationship to Theodulf's *Contra iudices* on numerous levels seem to me indisputable. Although clearly aware of Cacus' evil deeds, and actually quoting the false derivation of his name from the Greek word for evil itself, Augustine chose to make Cacus a sympathetic and almost pathetic figure, deprived of the comforts of friends and family, perhaps made an outcast because of his appearance, and driven by hunger to commit his evil deeds because of the necessity of preserving his life and finding a living! Augustine goes on to say that Cacus may never have existed at all, or was falsely described as he was by the ancient poets because of their desire to "exalt" Hercules, even if at

³⁹ *City of God*, 688. *De civitate Dei*, XIX.12, 676–77: "Sed faciamus aliquem, qualem canit poetica et fabulosa narratio. . . ."

Cacus' expense. In this light Hercules' exaltation and domination over all others appears not to be praiseworthy but rather, as Augustine goes on to say later in the same passage, exemplary of that sin of "pride [which] in its perversity apes God . . . [and] seeks to impose a rule of its own upon its equals," thereby destroying peace, which is the highest and ultimate good for man. It is revealing of his attitude that in one of his sermons Augustine again uses Hercules, the "virtuous hero" of the Stoics and other pagans, and in fact cites Hercules' defeat of Cacus among some other labors as emblematic of the hollowness, weakness, and falseness of pagan gods in comparison to Christian martyrs, developing a contrast between the physical strength and diabolical spiritual weakness of Hercules, on the one hand, and the physical weakness and spiritual strength of the young female martyr St. Agnes, on the other: "What therefore, my brothers, what shall I say to you of those men who worship pagan gods, by whom temples, rites, altars and sacrifices are produced? What shall I say to you? That they are not comparable to our martyrs? . . . That they should be compared would be sacrilege. In comparison to one weak Christian, trembling in all his [or her] members, what value has Hercules? He conquered Cacus, he conquered a lion, he conquered the dog Cerberus: [Yet Saint] Fructuosus conquered the World. Compare one man to another. [Saint] Agnes, a girl of but thirteen years, conquered the devil. Thus that girl conquered the one who, concerning Hercules, deceived many men."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ *Sermo* 273, ch. 6, PL 38, col. 1249. The rough English rendering is my own.

Augustine thus returns at the end of the discussion of Cacus to the notion of the sinful pride of the pagans. He therefore reverts to the very constellation of themes announced in his preface to the *City of God* as the essential content of the entire work, which opens with sharp criticism of the famous line from the *Aeneid* arrogantly and blasphemously asserting the Roman mission "to spare the conquered, battle down the proud," to which Augustine juxtaposes a text from the Psalms.⁴¹ Surely it can be no accident that in his poem, which directly addresses the necessity for the truly wise (*vera sophorum*) to find the allegorical truth hidden in the pagan writings of the false poets (*falsa poetarum*), Theodulf uses Cacus as one of his five examples. Referring to him as "poor, helpless Cacus," he uses the extraordinary Augustinian image of the pathetic monster, a victim of his own nature and of Hercules' superior physical courage and power, an image he cannot be thought to have invented himself, cannot have found in any other source, and must have derived from reading Augustine's unforgettable passage. Moreover, Augustine's strong suggestion that Cacus never lived at all but was an imaginary creation of the false poets may well be related to Theodulf's employment of the same figure and same story in his description of a pagan work of art which also never existed at all but which could, despite the evident lies of its surface, reveal important truths when interpreted in light of Christian revelation.

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⁴¹ *De civitate Dei*, 1, Preface, 1; *The City of God*, 3.